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CRITICAL NOTE

A NEW GLIMPSE OF GREEK TENSE-MOVEMENTS IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

The limit of function between the aorist and perfect in Greek has been with New Testament, as with other, grammarians a matter of no little interest. Especially for New Testament times there has seemed to be evidence of a tendency on the part of these tenses, if not toward amalgamation, at least toward a partial interchange of function. Thus an occasional aoristic perfect is recognized; while many aorists, translated by English present perfects, seem to have taken on a sense of completion quite foreign to the genius of the tense. Latin influence may have borne a part in this incipient breaking down of barriers between the two tenses. At all events, such a tendency in Hellenistic Greek must be acknowledged.

Recent publications of Greek papyri and ostraca have supplied new materials of an important sort for the study of those deeper and more elusive linguistic movements that work in the everyday speech of the common people. Thus Professor Wilcken, in his *Griechische Ostraka*, has printed the texts of over sixteen hundred of the inscribed potsherds on which the commonest receipts and orders of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt were written. These texts, brief as they are, possess the peculiar advantage of being usually dated, and assignable, on internal or other grounds, to a particular locality.

In examining one class of Professor Wilcken's texts, one is struck by the change in the later years of the first century, from perfect to aorist. Many of the ostraca are tax receipts, for poll tax, river-police tax, etc. The verb for paying or discharging the tax is *διαγράφειν*. In the Ptolemaic period and under the early emperors it appears in the perfect. More particularly, in the Ptolemaic time the second perfect *διαέγραψεν* is used; and under the early emperors the first perfect, *διαγεγράφηκεν*. The form is generally that of the following ostrakon, a document of April 22, 18 A. D.:

Διαγεγράψ(ηκεν)

Ζμητύθιος Παχνούβιος

ὑπ(έρ) λαογραφ(ίας) τοῦ πέμπτου (ἔτους)

Τιβερίου Καίσαρος Ξεβαστοῦ

Φαρμάθι κζ ἀργυ(ρίου) δραχ(μὰς) ὀκτώ/ση

(Second hand) Ἀπολ(ώνιος) ἐπηκολ(ούθηκα).¹

¹ Wilcker, *Griechische Ostraka*, Vol. II, No. 3.

Receipts of this type, with the first perfect of *διαγράφειν*, are found dated as early as 22 B. C. While the aorist appears in one ostrakon as early as 40 A. D., the perfect prevails in these documents to the almost complete exclusion of the aorist well into the seventh decade of the first century. In that decade the aorist appears with greater and greater frequency, and in the course of a dozen years almost completely supersedes the perfect, thereafter, so far as my observation goes, maintaining the ground gained. The last appearance of the perfect in these documents is in an ostrakon of 96 A. D., so that, as far as the evidence goes, in less than sixty years the displacement was complete. This singular movement may be traced in the receipts from Elephantine, and independently in those from the neighborhood of Thebes, the decade of transition being in both the same. Yet side by side with this newly accepted aorist stand such perfects as *μεμέτρημαι* and *μεμέτρηκεν*, over which, it will be noted, the corresponding aorist forms would have had no advantage in brevity. Ease in writing the shorter word, indeed, was probably without influence in the change, for the word, whether aorist or perfect, is usually abbreviated to its first four or five letters. The aorist's advantage in ease of utterance, however, may have helped its introduction into these documents. And it is always possible that the caprice of some new official, perhaps directly or indirectly under Latin influence, may have been in part responsible for the new fashion.

Whatever the causes that operated to produce this sudden change—among which Latin influence may have been one, and convenience of expression another—we may recognize in it an illustration of the rapid developments of tense-function to which Hellenistic Greek was liable, and of which the literary language was bound sooner or later to show the influence. For New Testament syntax this glimpse of first-century tense-movements in the common speech is particularly suggestive, not only in view of the coincidence in time, but especially because New Testament Greek lay nearer to the vernacular than to the literary language—a fact of which every day is bringing fresh evidence.

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